

# Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

## CHAPTER XXII

### Morris Ranch

Kerr-Gillespie Counties

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CHARLES MORRIS

**D**URING the past several years I have had occasion to motor from Kerrville to Fredericksburg over the road that winds through those beautiful hills through which the Pedernales flows. Always when I got away out in the hills where a plain, well-travelled road turns to the left it seems to beckon to me and to say, "This way, please." But my map said "Go straight ahead" for Fredericksburg. Finally one morning at the suggestion of a friend we motored out purposely to take the left-hand road to the Morris Ranch. Soon we came in sight of the first of some twelve two-story barns of English architectural design. On we went past the general store, the dilapidated buildings of the old flour mill and cotton gin, past the now abandoned houses, both large and small, and other stables, and on to a row of training barns or stables which covered the length of a city. Just in front and on a slightly rolling slope was another row of stables or training barns of the same length. Just to the left and in between these rows of stables stands a big rock house, fit to grace the once 16,000-acre ranch as headquarters. But it was only the Jockey Club. The real ranch headquarters was a treat to be enjoyed on a later visit.

This property was purchased in the "early eighties" by a young adventurer whose name was not thought to be important enough to have been included in the Morris records. But upon his return to the East, finding himself in need of some ready cash, he sold it to Francis Morris, a broker in New York City, for twenty-five cents an acre. Mr. Morris let him have the desired amount of money without any thought as to the real value of the land. There were thirty-four sections of land at that time. Later, nine sections were sold, leaving 16,000 acres. The years rolled on and Mr. Morris did not see his Texas property,

but during that time he wrote to a relative in England that he had heard that his property in Texas was actually worth twenty-five cents an acre.

Mr. Morris planned to make a visit to this property in 1886, but died before the trip could be made. His son, John A. Morris, then became owner of the ranch and it was he who developed it into a great race horse property. First and last some half million dollars were spent on improvements. These consisted of warehouses, fences, barns, a general store, and finally the cotton gin and flour mill, school house, and houses for the families who were to live there.

After John Morris' death in 1895, the property was owned by his two sons, A. H. and D. H. Morris, also of New York City, and finally by Captain John A. Morris, a son of A. H. Morris of New Orleans.

In order to understand how the Morris community became a cultural, religious and educational center, one needs to review briefly a few significant high lights of Captain John Morris' past life. He received his early education from private tutors at the family home in Throg's Neck, New York. He graduated from Yale when but eighteen years of age. Throughout his life he maintained the studious habits he acquired in early life, combining in his later readings clearness and strength of mind with his inherent

practicalness and steadiness. He was democratic in the truest sense of the word. As a capitalist he enjoyed a position of highest social and financial standing. He differed from many wealthy men of his class in that he could not only afford to do much intensive good, but he did so unostentatiously. He liked to entertain because he liked to give pleasure to others. Many of his real friends were among those who were far less blessed with material goods of this world. Through his wife he came into possession of the Hennen wealth, her father being Judge Hennen.

Captain Morris disliked notoriety. He sought individual cases where assistance was equally needed and deserved and then he gave. Some people he educated, some he helped financially. He contributed freely of finance to the movement for prevention of cruelty to animals. Few knew when the yellow fever was raging in New Brunswick, Georgia, how much he did in his quiet way to protect New Orleans. Born to wealth, he made use of the opportunity afforded him by his father, and at a time when there was no objection raised, he invested largely in the Louisiana Lottery, which proved profitable to him.

Captain Morris, because of his great wealth and because of his interest, could and did indulge in a great many kinds of interests. Among these were large holdings in the business section of New Orleans and large plantation holdings, which were worked along the lines of scientific agriculture. But his noted fondness and interest for horse racing was inherited from his English ancestry. He loved a horse race for the sake of the race, and not because of financial gain.

John A. Morris learned with his father the lesson of English superiority, but with clearness of judgment that marked a quality of his mind in all matters to which he gave his attention, he found



Left:—Some Thoroughbred colts on the Morris Ranch. Man with the mustache near the center is Clayton Morris.  
Right:—Where Charles Morris took his bride "home" in 1889. He had this house built for their home.

an English weakness in too close inbreeding, and evolved from his observations the value of the American outcross as later manifested in horses.

He owned three great breeding farms or ranches splendidly stocked with the best English, American and Australian blood.

As owner of many noted racing horses, Captain Morris took great pride in his breeding and training establishment in Maryland; but the 16,000-acre ranch near Kerrville, with the magnificent Winchester Park, Maryland, was Mr. Morris' pride as a gentleman owner. The ranch in Texas was recognized in turf circles as the finest nursery and training farm in America, just as Winchester was known to possess the finest race course.

Captain Morris' motto was progress and improvement. He loved horses and racing, and his object was to have the facilities of the finest establishments in the world for his self-imposed task of continuous improvement of American racing stock, not for the gains, but for the pleasure of racing. The appointments of his breeding farms and training stables were made what he thought they should be, with a princely disregard of expense.

On the Texas ranch, as perfect as it was immense, there was an average of 200 Thoroughbred mares and ten stallions. It was Captain Morris' custom to send 30 of the yearling output to his stables in Maryland and sell the remaining 170.

The Morris Ranch that became the cradle of a great many of the famous race horses was particularly adapted to the development of the finest animals. It is traversed by the Pedernales and its tributaries whose waters originate from springs that filter through strata after strata of readily soluble limestone, an essential food for the bony structure of growing animals. The undulating hills and valleys were covered with rich, short though succulent mesquite grass, growing from soil which rests upon and mingles with the substrata of limestone which underlies the surface soil. Some considered this grass even better than the bluegrass of Kentucky as food for horses whether it was a mustang or Thoroughbred. With an altitude of 1,700 feet above sea level the pure dry atmosphere almost guaranteed a tremendous lung expansion and a consequent depth of girth of animals nurtured there.

#### Charles Morris Made Manager.

And while John A. Morris himself did not live on the ranch all the time, he guided it by his influence and shaped its policies. And just as he carefully selected the best of Thoroughbred horses from the finest blood, he selected the best of people of cultured interest and lofty ideals to operate and manage the ranch. It was only natural that it would become a community of note for its educational, cultural and spiritual interests.

Before Francis Morris died, he had sent his nephew, Charles Morris, to the ranch to act as general manager. He served in this capacity from 1887 to 1910, at which time his health gave way.

At the height of the horse race business on the ranch, he had helping him and in charge of the various departments, his brothers, Albert, Fred, George, Gilbert, Frank and Clayton, and his sisters, Libbie and Ellen. Others came until there were about two hundred people living on the "Morris Ranch."

The horse race business was operated on a very large scale on the ranch. About one dozen two-story, large barns were located in various sections of the property. The two training barns, about one block in length with enclosed runways extended all around a central row of stalls, the north side being glassed in.

In addition to the large barns usually located in pairs, there were smaller barns and other buildings. Some were used for brood mares, some were used for young colts. There was a two-story stone building used for a combination store and post office. Upstairs in this building was a recreational hall. There was also another stone building used for a warehouse, with a drug store in front. Dr. Darroh, the veterinarian, had an office in this building. On the other side of the store there was a three-story building with a basement, a flour mill and a cotton gin, both built of native white stone. Then there was the three-room rock building, the central room of which was used for church services, and the two side rooms for school rooms. When they had school entertainments or other special occasions, the folding doors were pushed back and all three rooms could be thrown into one big room. Near the Charles Morris home was another large two-story frame house built for the men to live in who did not have families. Miss Ellen Morris had charge of this house. It was generally known as the hotel. Across from these houses was a large rock barn in which was housed the work horses and mules. Nearby was a large barn for the stallions. Both

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barns had large hay lofts. Back of the barns were several acres fenced off in seven or eight large pens for the stallions to exercise in. All fencing was of planking with double fences between the pens. This was very expensive, but as the stallions were fine blooded and valuable, nothing was too good for them.

Each family was located in a house that was made as comfortable as it could be at that time. And while the men were busy with the various activities on the ranch, the women were busy with their home-making duties. They were located eleven miles from Fredericksburg and sixteen miles from Kerrville. The roads to either place were rough and during the rainy season very muddy. They used oil lamps, did all of the house work including washing, ironing and sewing for the family.

When Charles Morris first took charge of the ranch he was not married. So there was no "White House." But when he married Jane Beal Anderson, daughter of a prominent ranchman of Kerr county, and a teacher in the Fredericksburg school, he built a beautiful home for her which still stands on the ranch.

Clayton Morris who succeeded his brother as manager of the ranch came out from Michigan with his wife and baby in 1893.

"I felt as if I were coming to the wild and wooly West," smiled Mrs. Morris, "but the wild flowers were beautiful and that was one of the reasons I was willing to stay."

Although they were isolated from the rest of the world, so to speak, they were not lonely. They combined neighborliness and pleasure. They had quilting parties at the various homes, each woman bringing a covered dish. And as they quilted they visited with each other. Mrs. Albert Morris, an English lady, had been trained in dramatics, so she organized a dramatic club. Sometimes they would have a barbecue and a play that night by the dramatic club.

Mrs. Sam Sharp was a music teacher on the ranch. Many happy evenings were spent sitting around the fireside listening to good music and singing.

The Shakespeare club met once a week. This was purely an educational study group. Therefore, they did not serve refreshments, but occasionally social meetings were held, then the members took "turn about" serving refreshments.

#### Had Own School.

A school was maintained for the children on the ranch. The teachers were paid well. Every effort was put forth to obtain the best qualified teachers. The school included the seventh grade in which they received State recognition. As the years rolled by the pupils took part in the various county and interscholastic events. When a pupil received a recognition for some activity, every citizen of the community felt that he had been honored.

Every effort was made to interest the young folks so that they would be happy out there. The women organized a P. T. A. and were active in the school affairs.

There was an excellent school provided for the jockeys. In addition to being well paid for their services as jockeys, they had a comfortable home in a large, handsome stone house built especially for them. There was a large, airy dining room which opened into the spacious, well-equipped school room. The kitchen, the housekeeper's apartments and lavatory were on the ground floor. The dormitory

for the jockeys and bathroom and well-equipped apartment for the teacher were on the second floor. Broad, shady galleries were on the south and east, both upstairs and down. Every room was comfortable and kept spotlessly clean. The jockeys were served three square meals each day. No wonder some of the most famous jockeys of the country came from there. They had a real home and the greatest incentive to do their best. There were usually about ten or twelve jockeys and that many helpers. One night the boys decided to pitch their teacher out the window. But the boys came out second best and there was no further trouble.

The celebrated Max Hirsch received his initial training as a jockey there.

Later he became a trainer. Now he and his daughter are trainers in New York.

Religious services were held regularly. Ministers came out from Kerrville, San Antonio and Fredericksburg. Ministers from the Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Baptist churches each preached one Sunday out of each month. The women had their various church societies. They met and sewed and quilted for the orphanages of the various churches. The membership in the Baptist Church predominated and they participated rather strongly in the State organizations.

The community was noted for its unusual type of entertainment. One of the community occasions enjoyed most was on the Fourth of July, 1894, when

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the entire community united in a big celebration. They had a meeting and selected the names for the floats in the mammoth parade. The dramatic society entered a Dramatic float; there were Liberty, Lone Star and Children's floats. Then there was one float each for the various nationalities that were represented on the ranch. These included Mexico, Germany, England and American. One of the big jokes of that occasion was that R. B. Everett, an Englishman who had married the school teacher, represented "Uncle Sam" on a float.

Another great occasion was the Christmas tree and celebration held in the store building in 1890, just before the goods were put in. One of the noted people on the ranch was Louis Bierschwald. He started working in the store right at the beginning.

A great many distinguished guests were entertained at the ranch. The guest list included distinguished people in this country and abroad. One winter Richard Crocker, Tammany chieftain and his family came down from New York, with Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Morris and family.

The ranch was noted for its distinctive parties and unusual entertainments. One time they gave a "rattlesnake party." Mr. Griffin, a great snake hunter, opened up a den of rattlesnakes, using powder and blasting open the den. They had been hibernating all winter but there had been a few warm sunshiny days and the snakes were about ready to come out anyway. They killed 32 snakes, much to the consternation and delight of the guests. The guests enjoyed horseback riding. The branding of horses and cattle, and bronco riding were occasions of interest and delight for both the guests and ranch folks.

There was no running water or modern conveniences as has been stated before. Mrs. Charles Morris, the "boss's wife," was the only woman on the ranch who had help, and she only had two boys. But every woman on the ranch was always ready to "help out" with the entertaining. Really, such a family spirit existed that every one on the ranch felt that the company was "our company."

Mr. Morris felt that one of the things needed badly was a post office, the nearest one being eleven miles away in Fred-

ericksburg. Finally a postal inspector visited the ranch, and after looking over the situation, he gave the order for one to be established. He asked Mr. Morris if he had thought about a name. The place is known everywhere as the "Morris Ranch," he said, and until the present day the post office is still of the same name. Miss Libbie Morris became the postmistress.

It was indeed a community of happy families that watched the horses in their various stages of training, and finally on the one-mile race track that was laid out and graded up in regulation shape, just before they were sold or sent to Maryland. They were sold to dealers in Lexington, Ky., and other important racing centers and were entered in the best races throughout America. The ranch was thriving, but when the anti-race law was passed in New York in 1897 the death knell sounded on the ranch as a breeding place and for the training of the finest horses.

#### Ranch Now Farmed.

Finally the ranch was cut up into probably seventy-two farms. At first they tried negro tenants who worked all right when they worked. But at the most unexpected moments, and generally when there was some urgent work to be done, a negro preacher would happen along and start a revival meeting. They tried Mexicans, then white tenants.

Cotton was one of the main cash crops, and a big cotton gin was erected. Charles Morris had retired in 1910 because of ill health and had moved to Sutherland Springs. He was succeeded by his brother, Clayton Morris. He was in every way a worthy successor. His love and appreciation of fine blooded horses was equal to that of any of the Morris family. He was interested in scientific agriculture and was public spirited. The Morris Ranch, under his direction paid half of the salary of the county agent of that county until the county saw fit to appropriate the full amount required to secure the services of an agricultural agent.

A 4-H Club was organized for boys and girls on the ranch. The ranch won first place in the community exhibits at the county seat, Fredericksburg, for three years. The prize of \$100 was applied on the school.

"About all we had to eat at first were beans and pork," said Mrs. Clayton Morris, "but the Morris' raised gardens after they came."

Much of the grain used for feed was raised on the ranch. Meal was ground and oats chopped at the mill for the horses. The surplus was sold in nearby towns. Three grades of flour were also ground at the mill, "Bell Extra" was named for Charles Morris' wife; "Buster" was named for his oldest son, and "Cayuga" was named for one of the fine horses.

Acreage has been sold off from time to time until now Clayton Morris and his son, Reginald, are the only ones interested in the ranch. Reginald Morris and his family still live at the headquarters, while Mr. and Mrs. Clayton Morris live in San Antonio.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Morris' two sons are still living, Otha A. Morris in Kerrville, and Charles Albert Morris in Wichita Falls.

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